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ABSTRACT

This study used the national crisis following President Nixon's decision to send troops into Cambodia as an opportunity to investigate the effectiveness of social influence variables (sex and clothing attire) under conditions of high ego-involvement. Four hundred and forty-six adult passersby were presented an antiwar petition by the authors (one male, one female) who wore either conventional or hippie attire. Results show that both sex and dress of the petitioner influenced the rate of signatures and the type of response given by those individuals not signing the petition. Specific results are discussed in terms of various social psychological theories. In general, it is suggested that the impact of social influence variables is inversely related to the strength of an individual's commitment to an attitude. (Author/TL)

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Social Influence In a High-Ego-Involvement Situation: A Field Study of Petition Signing

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Recently it has been proposed by McGuire (1969) that most attitude change research has employed rather apathetic audiences, disinclined to attend to the persuasive message or to refute its arguments. In line with this Johnson and Scileppi (1969) have questioned the extent to which attitude change results (and theory) observed in the laboratory under conditions of low-ego-involvement generalize to more self-involving situations. Studies that have employed high-ego-involvement conditions have found a considerable reduction in the effect of high source credibility (Johnson and Scileppi, 1969; Johnson and Steiner, 1968) and the effects of source pressure (Divesta, 1959). It would seem that the effects of variables commonly manipulated in attitude change and social influence studies need to be reexamined under conditions of high-ego-involvement. This might be best achieved by field studies.

An opportunity for such a study occurred in the spring of 1970 when President Nixon announced his decision to send United States troops into Cambodia. In the weeks following this announcement, dissent, especially among student populations, rapidly developed into a nationwide strike. Violent confrontations throughout the

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nation served to polarize the attitudes of the American people either for or against the decision. In this setting thousands of students petitioned, paraded, demonstrated, etc. Among those who worked against the war, a number cut their hair, shaved their beards, and donned conventional attire (Time, 1970). Such action assumed that their unconventional physical appearance was alienating many people who might otherwise support their cause.

The possibility that unconventional physical appearance could be counterproductive in seeking signatures for petitions is consistent with several theories of social influence. For example, Festinger's social comparison theory (1954) and Osgood and Tannenbaum's contiguity theory (1955) assume that similarity between the source and the target facilitates the influence process. The unconventional physical appearance of many petitioners could serve to accentuate the dissimilarity between the source and the target and thereby hinder the influence process.

Several recent public opinion polls also provide a rough index of the dissimilarity and consequent hostility that the general public feels toward protesters. The Washington Post (1967) reported that in one survey 40% of its respondents would deny the right of peaceful demonstration to people opposing the war. A more recent CBS poll of 1,136 adults indicated that of those questioned three-fourths felt "extremist groups should not be permitted to organize demonstrations against the government even if there appeared to be no clear danger of violence" (Reston, 1970).

While there are a variety of variables which could explain the attitudes reflected in these polls, it is possible that one of the more important variables is simply the unconventional physical appearance of many protesters. If this is true, than a shift to a more conventional appearance should increase the success of petitioners. Such a shift would also raise the status and hence the social influence of the petitioner. One demonstration of this relationship was provided by Lefkowitz, Blake and Mouton (1955) who operationalized an individual's status by varying dress. They found that more people followed the high status individual (suit, white shirt, and tie) when he crossed traffic intersections against the WAIT signal than followed the low status individual (patched trousers and unpressed denim shirt).

Since the petitioner in unconventional (hippie) attire has great visibility and since his anti-war views are well known, it is likely that passersby who disagree with the hippie's stand could anticipate a confrontation in which they would be asked to endorse something they disagreed with. The anticipation of a confrontation should lead to increased resistance to persuasion (Freedman and Sears, 1965). In the present study this resistance is most likely to be reflected in the reasons people give for not signing the petition. When petitioners are conventionally dressed (straight), the subject has less forewarning of the views expressed in the petition and less time to formulate a response. Thus conventionally and unconventionally dressed petitioners should receive different kinds of responses from those who disagree with the petition.

The variable of dress has another important implication. This is associative casting. Copper and Jones (1969) explain associative casting as the tendency to assume that other people who have similar positions in the social structure will have similar beliefs and values. One consequence of associative casting is the tendency of individuals to try to be seen with the "right people" and to avoid "socially damaging" situations. Presumably passersby favoring the President's decision would be more likely to try to avoid the hippie dressed petitioners because of their anti-war views. It would also follow that passersby opposing the President's decision would be more likely to seek out the unconventionally dressed petitioner.

A second variable examined in the present study was the relationship between the sex of the source and the sex of the target. It has been found that people are more likely to be persuaded by a communicator who is seen as similar to themselves (Brock, 1965; Keasey, Walsh, and Moran, 1969). These findings suggest that a male petitioner would be more successful with other males and females would be more successful with other females. On the other hand, advertisers have been very successful using females to sell products to men and politicians have often incorporated pretty females into campaign parades on their behalf (Time, 1968). Furthermore, since many unemployed women volunteer to petition and canvas for candidates, the relationship between the sex of the petitioner and the target needs to be clarified.

The present study, then, investigated four hypotheses.

1. That unconventionally dressed petitioners would be less successful than petitioners who were conventionally dressed.
2. That petitioners would be more successful with same-sex rather than opposite-sex individuals.
3. That there would be systematic differences in the responses of passersby not signing the petition.
4. That a larger proportion of passersby would try to avoid the unconventionally dressed petitioner than the conventionally dressed petitioner.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects consisted of 446 adults, 173 males, and 273 females. The individuals were contacted by the experimenters in two large suburban shopping centers near Trenton, New Jersey. About 6% of the subjects were black, the remainder were white.

Procedure

The authors, one male and one female, served as the experimenters and circulated the following petition:

Dear Congressman:

I am deeply disturbed about the President's recent decision to send troops into Cambodia and about the continued war in Southeast Asia. I ask you as my representative to demand the immediate withdrawal of all military and financial support for the war.

In both shopping centers, the petitioners stood on the sidewalk near the entrance of a large department store. In order to minimize the influence of one passerby's response upon another, groups of individuals were not contacted. To each single adult person who passed by, one of the two petitioners said, "Excuse me sir (m'am), I have a petition here that I would like you to look at." The petitioner then handed the petition, which was mounted on a clip-board, to the subject. Regardless of the subject's reaction, the petitioner said as little as possible and avoided any sort of persuasion. While one experimenter presented the petition to the subject, the other experimenter stood off to the side and recorded the sex, race, and comments of the subject as well as whether or not the petition was signed. The experimenters exchanged duties after thirty people had been approached. In this way approximately half of the subjects were presented the petition by the female experimenter and half by the male experimenter.

Data were collected from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on three consecutive weekdays (May 18-20). On the first and third days of data collection the two experimenters were conventionally dressed. The male petitioner wore a dark, conservative business suit, white shirt, and tie. The female wore a conservative two piece suit, heels, and hose. Her hair was pulled neatly back and held with a barrett. On the second day of data collection the same two experimenters wore unconventional (hippie) attire.[2] The male's hippie attire consisted of sandals, frayed white levis, a faded U.S. Army fatigue jacket, Benjamin Franklin type sunglasses and a

black leather head band over tousled hair. The female wore a wrinkled blue work shirt, blue and white striped bell bottom pants, sandals, beads, and large purple sunglasses. In this case her long hair was simply falling straight down.

RESULTS

The number and percentage of passersby who signed the petition are presented in Table 1 according to sex of passerby, and sex and attire of the petitioner. Statistical tests between percentages were conducted by means of determining the significance of the difference between two proportions. All probability values reported are for two-tailed tests.

Insert Table 1 about here

From the first hypothesis, it was expected that unconventionally dressed petitioners would obtain a smaller proportion of signatures than conventionally dressed petitioners. The percentage of signatures obtained when the experimenters were conventionally dressed was 35. When unconventionally dressed, the percentage of signatures fell to 23. This difference was highly significant ($z=2.63$, $p < .01$). An examination of Table 1 shows that for all comparisons the proportion of signatures obtained is higher when the petitioner is conventionally dressed than when he is unconventionally dressed. However, when tested separately the only difference that reaches statistical significance involves the male experimenter approaching male subjects ($z=2.38$, $p < .02$).

The second hypothesis predicted that petitioners would be more successful obtaining signatures from members of their own sex. For the male petitioner, the overall difference was in the expected

direction but was not significant ($z = 1.27$, $p = .20$). Contrary to the prediction, the female experimenter was also more effective with males than with females ($z = 3.15$, $p < .002$). Thus, the second hypothesis was not supported. On the contrary, both experimenters obtained significantly more ($z = 3.09$, $p = .002$) signatures from males than females. The only case in which this relationship did not hold was when the male experimenter was unconventionally dressed.

Although the two experimenters did not differ significantly ($z = 1.55$, $p = .12$) in the proportion of signatures obtained overall, the results show a trend for the male petitioner to be more successful than the female petitioner. The male petitioner obtained a greater proportion of signatures than the female (1) when conventionally dressed and asking males to sign (2) when conventionally dressed and asking females to sign and (3) when unconventionally dressed and asking females to sign. The male petitioner obtained fewer signatures than the female only when he was unconventionally dressed and asking males to sign.

Hypothesis three predicted that there would be systematic differences in the responses of people who would not sign the petition depending on whether the petitioner was "hippie" or "straight". To look at this hypothesis all responses from passersby who did not sign the petition were coded as (1) polite refusals (2) reasoned refusals, (3) evasive or (4) hostile. Polite refusals included remarks like "No thanks", "I'm not interested", and "No, I don't want to". Reasoned refusals included responses that gave specific substantive reasons for not wanting to sign such as

"I agree with the President," "I think Nixon's doing the right thing," and "I don't agree with the petition." In contrast, responses coded as evasive avoided the issue. Examples of such responses are "I don't have time," "I'm from Iowa," and "I've got to pick my kids up." In addition a number of subjects just walked by the petitioners, completely ignoring them. These responses were also coded as evasive. All responses which included personal attacks on the petitioners were coded as hostile. Examples from the present study are "You must be sick," "Why don't you wear red arm bands," and "I'd sign one to clear the colleges of bums and radicals." Two raters independently categorized all of the responses. For a total of 271 responses, the raters agreed on 96%.

The conventionally dressed petitioner was given a polite refusal (48% versus 31%) or a reasoned refusal (27% versus 17%) significantly more often than the unconventionally dressed petitioner ($z=2.77$, $p<.005$ and $z=2.06$, $p<.04$ respectively). In contrast, the "hippie" petitioner was given an evasive response significantly more often than the "straight" petitioner (52% versus 22%, $z=5.27$, $p<.0002$). The experimenters had expected that more hostile responses would be directed toward the hippie petitioner. In fact, the opposite was true. Although the number of hostile responses was low, all were directed toward the conventionally dressed petitioner (3% versus 0%, $z= 1.70$, $p<.09$).

The fourth hypothesis predicted that passerbys would make an overt attempt to avoid the "hippie" petitioner. To test this hypothesis the number of subjects who ignored the petitioner's

presentation and just walked on was examined for the two conditions of dress. It was found that the proportion of subjects who attempted to avoid the unconventionally dressed petitioner significantly outnumbered those who attempted to avoid the conventionally dressed petitioner (13% versus 4%, $z=2.35$, $p<.01$).

It was not possible to systematically determine whether or not passersby went out of their way to seek out the petitioners. The only clear cut case involved a young male who drove his VW over the curb of the sidewalk in order to sign the petition being presented by a "hippie" petitioner.

DISCUSSION

Given the national crisis that preceded this study, it was assumed that attitudes concerning the invasion of Cambodia would be firmly held. In other words, signing or not signing a petition opposing the President's decision was assumed to be a high-ego-involvement situation. If this was the case then one would expect a relatively uniform rate of signatures from passersby regardless of the sex or dress of the individual presenting the petition. If, however, the rate varied significantly, then it would appear that external variables affected the behavior most likely to follow from an individual's attitude toward President Nixon's decision. The significant relationship between the petitioner's dress and the proportion of signatures obtained suggests that the attire of the petitioner was an important factor. Both balance theory and source credibility provide possible explanations for this finding.

From balance theory one would expect that subjects who opposed the President's decision, but also disapproved of unconventionally

dressed individuals would find themselves in a state of cognitive imbalance. This imbalance could be resolved by evaluating the specific petition negatively, deciding to express disapproval of the President's decision in another way, etc. All of these actions to restore balance would reduce the rate of signatures. Thus, this explanation interprets the different rate of signatures as primarily due to a decrease in signatures when the petitioner was unconventionally dressed.

A source credibility explanation would focus more upon the greater status and hence greater credibility of the conventionally dressed petitioner. Within this framework, the different rate of signatures would be seen as resulting primarily from the increased proportion of passersby signing a petition presented by a highly credible source. Of course the low source credibility of a person in hippie attire would also be expected to lead to a decreased rate of signatures. The fact that the men petitioned by a conventionally dressed male had the highest rate of signatures (46%) lends support to the source credibility explanation.

The finding of the present study concerning the relationship between attire and social influence is consistent with findings reported by Lefkowitz, Blake and Mouton (1955) and Cooper[3]. Cooper had conventionally and unconventionally dressed males handout leaflets in a shopping center. Significantly more passersby accepted leaflets from conventionally dressed males (88% versus 78%), and of individuals accepting leaflets those who had obtained one from a conventionally dressed individual were more likely to keep it (78% versus 65%). It thus appears that hippie attire is counterproductive

in obtaining signatures on petitions and in distributing leaflets.

The second variable of interest in this study was the relationship between the sex of the petitioner and the sex of the passerby. The clear finding here is that more males signed the petition regardless of the petitioner's sex or dress. One could conclude that males are more likely to sign petitions or that males were more opposed to the President's decision. However, a somewhat more reasonable explanation seems to be that females are less likely to commit themselves. In fact, examination of the data reveals that females were significantly more likely to give evasive answers than males ($z=1.92$, $p=.05$).

Another interesting trend is the higher proportion of signatures obtained by the male experimenter. This proportion favored the male experimenter except when he was unconventionally dressed and presenting the petition to males. This suggests that the higher status and power attributed to males in our society makes them generally more effective as petitioners.

When unconventionally dressed, the male petitioner was not as effective with male passersby as was the female petitioner. Part of this reversal seems due to the relatively high rate of signatures obtained from males by the hippie dressed female. It is possible that there is a certain allure to the 'hip chick' that increases the proportion of males signing. Certainly that allure would not be effective with female passersby. This explanation is partially supported by the fact that the highest rate of signatures obtained by hippie petitioners occurred when the female petitioned males and the lowest occurred when she petitioned females.

A second possible reason for this reversal may be that the hippie

male is viewed as more dangerous or threatening than the female hippie. This seems plausible given the bizarre and violent acts often associated in the mass media with male hippies.

Finally, it is possible that the trend for the male petitioner to be more successful than the female resulted totally or in part from differences between the two petitioners other than sex. Such differences could be forcefulness of speech, facial expressions, various personality traits, etc. This explanation seems unlikely since the presentation of the petition was highly standardized and any additional interaction with the passerby was avoided. However, whether or not this was the case could be resolved by employing a variety of petitioners.

It was expected that the dress of the petitioner would affect the responses of people who did not sign the petition. The greater incidence of individuals ignoring the hippie petitioner's presentation and walking by is consistent with the associative casting hypothesis that people will avoid "socially damaging" situations. The greater proportion of evasive responses received by the hippie petitioners may be due to their relatively low credibility as an influence source. Individuals might also have been motivated to avoid hippie petitioners because they view hippies as somewhat threatening and dangerous. In this context it is interesting that the male hippie was more likely to receive evasive responses than the female hippie. However, this trend needs to be replicated as it was nonsignificant.

The surprising finding that all of the hostile responses were directed toward conventionally dressed petitioners can be reasonably explained in terms of balance theory. Subjects presented a petition

by a conventionally dressed individual must resolve the cognitive inconsistency of a similar looking individual advocating views very dissimilar from his own. The hostile responses would appear to be attempts to degrade an individual holding an opposing point of view. In fact, when conventionally dressed the experimenters noted that several subjects expected the petition to support rather than oppose the President's decision. When this expectation was not upheld the subject's orientation changed rapidly from positive to negative.

In conclusion it appears that even in a high-ego-involvement situation two external variables, sex and dress of petitioners, influenced the behavior of passersby. It is the authors' opinion that in issues less widely publicized and less emotionally charged external variables would have a greater impact than they did in the present study. Since no attitude change could be directly observed and since no persuasive attempt was made one would suspect that attitude change, if any, was minimal. Although it is generally recognized that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between attitudes and behavior it is somewhat surprising that the relationship was not stronger in a relatively high-ego-involvement situation.

Levy and House (1970) point out that theories of social influence and attitude change have focused primarily upon the external variables of social influence and upon the personality of the target individual, while essentially failing to take into account the characteristics of the target attitude. They suggest that one important characteristic of an attitude is its origin. The present study suggests that another important characteristic of an attitude is the extent of an individual's commitment to it. Commitment need not be related to the extremeness

of an attitude. Extremeness of an attitude is largely the product of the way in which attitudes are measured--i.e., a point on a continuum. Commitment is seen as a function of the quantity of relevant information an individual has assimilated and the extent to which he has actively operated upon that information. Therefore the taking in of information, by itself, does not necessarily insure that the individual will actively think about the information nor integrate it into his present belief systems.

The quantity of attention directed toward an issue of national importance increases the probability that most people will have some information and therefore some basis for an attitude. In addition, the continued flow of information from the mass media will encourage people to actively operate upon their new information. The result should be a more firmly held attitude than is typically dealt with in most social influence and attitude change research. It is suggested that the effect of external variables upon an attitude will be inversely related to an individual's commitment to that attitude.

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Footnotes

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[2] The petitioners were asked to leave the second shopping center by the Township police pending approval of a permit. During the two-week delay in obtaining the permit, conditions changed so that further data collection in unconventional dress would not have been comparable.

[3] J. Cooper, personal communication, October 22, 1970.

Table 1

Percentage of Passersby Signing a Petition According to Sex of Passerby and Sex and Attire of Petitioner

Sex of Passerby	Male Petitioner		Female Petitioner	
	Conventionally Dressed	Unconventionally Dressed	Conventionally Dressed	Unconventionally Dressed
Males				
No. non-signers	37	24	35	8
No. signers	32	7	25	5
% signers	(.464)	(.226)	(.417)	(.385)
Females				
No. non-signers	55	26	74	47
No. signers	27	10	25	9
% signers	(.329)	(.278)	(.248)	(.161)

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